

Cultivating Regionalism: Higher Education and the Making of the American Midwest

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Cultivating Regionalism: Higher Education and the Making of the American Midwest, by Kenneth H. Wheeler. Early American Places. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011. x, 156 pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$38.00 cloth.

Reviewer Richard S. Taylor is the retired chief historian for the Historic Sites Division, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency. His publications include *Western Colleges as "Securities of Intelligence and Virtue": The Towne-Eddy Report of 1846* (1980).

Does the Midwest possess a distinctive regional culture worthy of study? Kenneth H. Wheeler thinks so and sets out in *Cultivating Regionalism* to identify and describe a distinctive cluster of typically midwestern attitudes and practices that he believes were fostered by the many small liberal arts colleges that proliferated across the region's landscape in the nineteenth century. He does not presume to describe the regional culture as a whole, only certain important features of that culture hitherto neglected by scholars. The book draws on his 1999 dissertation but bears little resemblance to that work. Wheeler deserves credit for performing the arduous task of carefully selecting portions of his dissertation, supplementing them with further research, and reorganizing the whole into a concise, clearly written, and well-developed book.

Neither midwestern culture nor the small religiously affiliated liberal arts colleges with which Wheeler concerns himself have fared particularly well among historians. The analytical utility of place generally and region in particular has seemed trivial to scholars obsessed with race, class, and gender. Even those cognizant of regionalism as a useful category have preferred New England or the South to the Midwest. Some have doubted that a coherent midwestern culture exists, while others have criticized the region for what they perceive as its mind-numbing blandness and provincial conformity. Even those who have recognized the region's remarkable diversity have ignored its particularity by dismissively characterizing it as a microcosm of America. But since the 1990s there has been a small yet unmistakable upsurge of scholarly interest in regionalism exemplified by *Regionalism and the Humanities* (2008), edited by Timothy Mahoney and Wendy J. Katz, and Indiana University Press's *The American Midwest: An Interpretive Encyclopedia* (2007). *Cultivating Regionalism* makes a fine addition to that growing literature.

Historians have tended to describe the small nineteenth-century liberal arts colleges founded by religious denominations and local boosters in what is now the Midwest as projections of New England culture. Wheeler thinks not. He argues that they were fundamentally

home-grown institutions propagating indigenous values. Far removed from national centers of power and wealth, western college founders capitalized on state legislatures eager to grant charters and plunged into a democratic environment largely unfettered by tradition to create institutions nicely tailored to their small-town and rural constituents.

The manual labor programs that proved short-lived in the tradition-bound East and aristocratic South survived in western colleges long enough to integrate farming into student life, which fostered an anti-elitist producer ethic and laid a foundation for the later emergence of scientific agriculture as an academic discipline. Coeducation flourished in the West prior to the Civil War, providing opportunities for women and promoting egalitarian attitudes. Wheeler argues that midwestern colleges disseminated "a culture of usefulness" grounded in Protestantism's drive to reform society and "a mostly middle-class emphasis on practical and productive labor for the common good" (54). He finds that western students were older, poorer, and more pious than their eastern and southern counterparts. Receptive to political diversity, they grew accustomed through their literary societies to wrestling with ideas and settling their differences democratically through debate, making them less likely to riot than students in other regions. Not surprisingly, midwestern liberal arts colleges were, by the close of the nineteenth century, producing more scientists than schools in any other region, which Wheeler traces to a pragmatic, hands-on empiricism and respect for scientific inquiry, again indigenous and traceable to the small colleges. He even speculates that midwestern culture flowered at the beginning of the twentieth century into "a common heartland consciousness" (89) that inspired the writers, social reformers, and scientists of the Progressive era.

Readers put off by the rather boosterish tone and thesis-driven character of Wheeler's work should keep in mind that he claims only to be recovering certain neglected aspects of the region's history, not to be telling the whole story, and that is a worthy undertaking given the contempt that many scholars have heaped upon the Midwest and its small colleges. Yet *Cultivating Regionalism* is thoughtful and suggestive rather than conclusive given the author's heavy reliance on evidence drawn from what might be called the antebellum educational establishment of Congregationalist, Presbyterian, and Methodist colleges. His important insights deserve further testing relative to the smaller denominations and ethnic schools to which he devotes only passing attention and the Catholic institutions that he neglects entirely. Finally, his depiction of the early liberal arts college with its evangelical ethos

as democratic and science-friendly seems a bit overdrawn. Students of American religion, including Amanda Porterfield, Tracy Fessenden, and John Lardas Modern, are raising serious questions about Nathan Hatch's evangelicalism-as-a-democratic-movement thesis, which has reigned triumphant for several decades and is built into Wheeler's argument. And while the hands-on empiricism of the natural philosophy (science) taught in the old-time colleges may have inspired inventors and explorers, it drew on an understanding of moral and physical reality as divinely created, mechanical, and law-governed that ruled out the kind of open-ended skeptical inquiry upon which modern science depends.

God's Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War, by George C. Rable. The Littlefield History of the Civil War Era. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. 586 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth.

Reviewer Bryon C. Andraesen is a research historian at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library & Museum. He has written several articles about religion during the Civil War.

Historians have written hundreds of volumes discussing the origin, course, and outcome of the Civil War. But the "absence of virtually any reference to religious forces in the standard Civil War narratives is remarkable," suggests award-winning Civil War historian George C. Rable, adding that this "would have struck those in the Civil War generation as very odd" (396). Indeed, Rable's thesis rests on the proposition that for many nineteenth-century Americans God's intervention in human history was an unquestioned verity of life. Thus, "many people on both sides of the conflict turned to religious faith to help explain the war's causes, course, and consequences" (9). This religious worldview provided a providential narrative that "offered ways to give all the bloodshed some higher and presumably nobler purpose" (9).

This book is an ambitious comprehensive religious history of the war covering both the North and the South, the battle front and the home front, soldiers and civilians, clergy and laity, men and women. Rable provides a cross section of denominational and theological perspectives that reaches beyond the dominant voices of the evangelical Protestant denominations and their ministers and theologians to include Catholics, Jews, and others. But the book is much more than just a wartime history of the churches.

Rable begins by reviewing the religious state of America going into the war, noting that religious faith had provided no cross-sectional